



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

# News Release

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## **Four women charged in ongoing ICE probe targeting former immigration consultant**

SAN DIEGO – Four women face state charges today after a probe by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the San Diego District Attorney’s Office linked them to a financial fraud scheme involving a former local immigration consultant convicted last year of bilking dozens of people who hired her to help with their immigration cases.

Following a seven month-long joint investigation, the San Diego District Attorney’s Office has lodged new felony charges, including identity theft, grand theft, and witness intimidation, against former San Diego immigration consultant Bemilda “Linda” Asuncion Ruiz, 38.

Ruiz, who just finished serving a one year sentence for her prior felony conviction, remains in custody this afternoon without bond for allegedly using personal information obtained from her immigration “clients” to take out fraudulent loans in their names without their knowledge or consent.

Three other women, including two notaries public, have been charged for their role in the identity theft scheme. Arrested last week in San Diego were, Alma Lacayo, 43, a notary public in Vista, and Merlyn Diaz, 24, a San Diego resident. Yesterday, ICE agents arrested the second notary, Reina Montoya, 29, who is in state custody in Santa Clara, California. The three women face various charges, including identity theft, forgery, and filing false documents with the government. The two notaries also face charges related to the abuse of their official duties.

“Criminals will go to great lengths to take advantage of innocent victims,” said Miguel Unzueta, special agent in charge for the ICE office of investigations in San Diego. “ICE is committed to doing everything it can to prevent vulnerable members in our communities from becoming victims of identity theft and other types of fraud schemes.”

Witnesses told agents that Ruiz deceived victims she escorted into the El Cajon CitiFinancial branch to sign loan documents. After obtaining the loans, which they never actually applied for, Ruiz duped them into giving her the loan checks.

In another loan related scheme, Ruiz used her friends who worked as notaries to forge signatures on real estate deeds she then used to obtain mortgage loans. The victims had no idea that real property had been recorded in their names.

ICE agents say Ruiz began working as an immigration consultant in the early 1990s, initially as a legal assistant at a local immigration law firm. Several of the victims in this case say they first met with Ruiz while she was working at the law firm. Ruiz opened Legal Services Network in 1999. The business has since closed.

ICE began investigating Ruiz and her then business partner, Jose Rolando Cesena, nearly three years ago after receiving a lead from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Officers with USCIS' Fraud Detection Unit became suspicious after intercepting more than a dozen immigration benefits applications filed by Cesena that included counterfeit visa approval notices.

Ruiz and Cesena pleaded guilty to multiple counts of grand theft last year in San Diego Superior Court and were ordered to pay nearly \$100,000 in restitution to their known victims.

In its ongoing effort to prevent fraudulent practitioners from preying on the immigrant community, ICE is appealing to anyone who believes they have been defrauded by Ruiz to come forward. Those who have information that may be valuable to this investigation are urged to call ICE's toll-free tip line at 1-866-DHS-2ICE, the San Diego District Attorney's Office at (619) 531-4070 or the Mexican Consulate in San Diego at (619) 308-9916.

# ICE #

*U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.*